Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 1

John Holmes interview 2/9/95

SWB: Can you tell me how it is that you came on your first

concentration camp. And just tell it to me the way that you

experienced it.

JOHN HOLMES: Well like I had said before, this was not uh,

deemed a concentration camp, It was a labor camp. We were

fighting in the Hartz mountain sector. Um. On our way into

fighting in Austria. Anyway, when we, when we, when we

crossed this river and we came into this area the Germans

were in there. But they were more, they didn't, they didn't

put up any resistance and they had an airport nearby. And

as a matter of fact this was the place I saw my first German

jets. And I never knew what they were, but I knew they were

just damn fast, because I tried to open up fire on them, a

couple of them. And by the time you could get your guns

trained, that thing was phew, gone like that. But anyway,

um, we s- we s-, um, we passed this house and off in the

distance you could see huge warehouses and then long rows of

um, something like a, I don't know what, it's not a quonset

hut, but uh, just a square, long buildings, and it had a

gate in it. And I don't recall what the writing was up over

the gate, but what it, what we did encounter, inside of

there, I got out the turret of my tank, and walked in to see

what was inside. And that was when I, d- d-, well you could

smell death for maybe 20 miles before you ever got to it,

because it's very dif-, humans and animals, entirely

different. You can stand a cow or a horse or something

that's been shot up, but a human being, is death, the stench

of death from it is, it's, it's awful. So, I saw this high

ceiling and this little narrow pathway down the center, and

they had maybe twelve or fourteen tiers. And you- and

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 2

you've just enough room, maybe oh I'd say, for an individual

to slip through, between each tier of bunks. And can you

imagine them being twi-, now me at six foot it is twice as

high as I am tall, in other words you got twelve or fourteen

feet. Now these bunks, they got little ladders going up

there and these people, now you might find underneath here

would be dead person, and in, living in that, living person

was just too damn weak to even move. And all they, all they

do is just hold out their hand, and you were afraid to touch

them. Uh, some of them had scabs and sores and everything

on them, they had just been there for- and- and what I

understand that these people were fed a ounce of meat I

think it was once a week. They were also given potato soup

or cabbage soup once a day in a um, a small cube of bread,

it might have been about like so. And I don't know how

thick it was but it couldn't have been very thick. And they

were nothing, they had an American Colonel in there, I don't

know how many months he had been a prisoner, but he

originally weighed about two, his height must have been, I'd

say a good six four. He originally weighed about 230, maybe

a little bit more. And I don't think that he weighed any

more than eighty pounds when we saw him. So you can imagine

the, the horror that those people suffered under Ger- German

occupation. Um, as prisoners of war, they didn't even feed

some of them. They- It was just- I- I- I- I- the only that

I can say to you would have to have seen it. The pictures

that you saw depicting the death in the concentration camps,

this was identically the same.

SWB: When you first drove the tank in, did you drive right

in.

JOHN HOLMES: No, no, I don't drive, I was a tank commander,

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 3

my driver did.

SWB: Tell me, were there any people outside?

JOHN HOLMES: None at all.

SWB: And did you exchange fire with anyone, or everyone was

gone.

JOHN HOLMES: The Germans took off and left everything just

as it was. Even their warehouses of guns. This- this was

the the- the um, I think this was the um, the Walter .32,

they made a .32 pistol. And these, uh, these uh prisoners

that were capable of work, any work at all, were the

laborers that did the assembling of these pistols and all in

that big huge factory to the rear. Uh there was no other

gun there but that and they had them in there by the

hundreds, just cases of them, you kind of like wonder where,

you know, went all that trouble to make those guns that

could have been feeding some of those people.

SWB: So when you went in the barracks and you found all

this did you, could you talk to anyone. Tell me what else

happened...

JOHN HOLMES: It was, it was virtually, can you- can- can

you imagine trying to talk some- to someone that do, they

don't even have the strength to op- for their vocal cords to

even operate. We were warned not to give them anything,

like our C rations and our K rations, don't give them that.

See these people had to be fed a broth, or something that

was soupy that they could swallow that would not choke them

to death because it, if you- if you fed them they couldn't

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 4

swallow it. If you gave them solid food, cause a lot of

people made that mistake. A lot of our soldiers made that

mistake when they ran across where they had you know

liberated somebody that had been under starvation

conditions. And they gave them their food. The food has a

tendency to choke you then. And you just choke to death.

Whereas if they would just let them alone and let the people

gradually eat soup until they get their strength back to

where your stomach becomes acclimated to it.

SWB: Were you surprised?

JOHN HOLMES: Yes I was. I truly was, because I just

couldn't believe that an individual that is supposed to be

fighting for the preservation of his cus- culture and his

country could be doing this to people who had not defense.

I couldn't believe this. Because you-you-you-you're flab

bergasted. You-you're so shocked by what you're looking at.

Well, I give you a good example. Uh-I-I, I-I-I wasn't

really surprised yet I was. I can say this, um, the

fourteenth reconnaissance platoon was out scouting and they

ran into a bunch of Nazi SS and they were captured. And we

had a hell of a fire fight. And I-I definitely was

responsible for killing one, two three, four, I'd say

approximately six German soldiers myself. Directing fire in

on them. They, these, they- they captured about a dozen of

these uh, it-it was the fourteenth conance- reconnaissance

unit. And they tied their hands behind their back and they

tied their feet together, and I'm not telling you what

somebody told me, I'm telling you what exactly I saw. And

in this little town there must have been at least, no-oh- I

don't even think this town had a- a- six houses in it. But

it had a little road that went down like a, and did you know

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 5

those Nazi SS s.o.b.'s took those, those- those young boys,

we were all about the same age, and they, when they put,

when they tied their hands and feet together, and hands

behind their back, and they laid them out along the row, in

a row, and they put a bullet right between their eyes. And

I can recall, from this fire fight, headquarters company I

think came in from the, southeast, and they had 105 guns,

105 millimeter guns. Ours were s- were these 75's and 76

millimeters. We killed just, I think we killed all of them.

I don't recall us taking any prisoners. Cause you had to

kill them. Because they were not going to surrender. The

Nazi SS was not going to surrender. They would shoot and

shoot until they were killed. It was stupid because they

were raised all the way from the Hitler youth. And that's

what they believed in. And when you caught them, they all

had that insignia on their collar. So that's how you knew

what you were fighting. But, to show you the difference

between um, fighting, at the concentration camp....

SWB: We have to put another roll of film...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: When you were first coming in was there an exchange of

fire and you shot down a plane?

JOHN HOLMES: No, there was no exchange of fire period. The

only thing that, uh, we- cause we were really amazed to see

these um, this- this junkers, I think, what was it, one, it

wasn't a junker, it was a German transport. We- the one

that I opened fire up on was um, a transport, I think it had

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 6

high ranking German officers in it. And of course we never

saw it crash, cause, when we shot into it, you know, by the

time when it's approaching you, and you open fire with a

fifty caliper machine gun, um, you don't know how many slugs

um, you put in them, but um, or, who survived, what with the

plane, you- you're two or three thousand feet off the

ground, and it just- it's going on in and-and-and the

engines are smoking, you know it's gonna crash but it

crashed way back to the back of us, so we never got a chance

to see what, you know, damage you'd done.

SWB: And were there guards in the guard houses when you

came to the camp.

JOHN HOLMES: None at all. Absolutely. I told you,

everybody had, the-they just, as they say, they shagged tail

on out of there. Uh, whatever guns and everything they had,

they just dropped them and ran. Now they didn't want the

co-, number one, th-the German soldier, uh, was a told all

the way back from Ger- uh- World War I, when they had black

Americans fighting over there in Europe, uh that, don't be

captured by black troops. Cause they would cut your throat.

Course which was a lie, but during World War I, a lot of our

guys did do that. They would infiltrate into the German

lines at night in World War I and they had razors. And th-

don't nobody know when somebody, you know, was clapped their

hand across your mouth and then cut your throat, and you lay

there and bleed to death and the rest of the guys around you

that survived it didn't even know that you were dead,

particularly the sentries on the outer line, parts, they

were always caught off-guard and killed like that. But uh

this went all the way back, this, [laughs] they said

[laughs] as a matter of fact, the German soldiers were, we

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 7

we shot up, I don't know whether you saw um, Liberators

fighting on two fronts, this one particular guy was in my

outfit, um, um, there was a bunch of Germans, must have been

two or three thousand that came out of the woods and, German

soldiers and they came out, and they took a look and they

looked and saw the black soldiers, and they said, what, oh

no, not you guys, and they turned around and started back

through the woods, and we put some high explosives over

their head and they come on back out just as nice with their

hands on back up, and they would rather take a chance rather

than be blown to bits, come on out and now let's talk

turkey.

SWB: When you went into this camp that you came upon, about

how long did you stay?

JOHN HOLMES: I would imagine we must have been there at

least, um, inside the camp itself maybe about an hour, hour

and, hour and a half, and when it came orders to move out,

um, I had already talked to this lady, Mrs. Schimmel,

because she came to the door, and um, she flagged me down

and she said um, soldier, she said um, and her English was

very good, Mrs. Schimmels, you would have thought that she

was from the states. But she was raised, she was an

Austrian person of German descent. And so she asked me

where I was from, I said I'm- I said I'm from Chicago. She

said Seargant, she said, you're from Chicago, I said yeah,

she said you know where Skokie is? I said sure I know where

Skokie is. I says right across the canal from where my

mother lives. She said I have a sister there, and I wonder

if you would give her a letter for me. And I said, well,

sure, so I gave her, she wrote the letter and I, when I was

discharged I took it by the house and gave it to her. And,

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 8

we- of course we didn't stay in the communications with one

another after that because her husband was rather nasty and

I didn- I didn't want to be bothered with it, going back,

but um. She was pretty- but the woman herself was very

nice. Met the sister and she thanked me for delivering that

and all. And I think the sister in Skokie wound up sending

for her, and she mi- if she's still living she's in the

states now.

SWB: Do you know what happened to the people in the camp

after you left.

JOHN HOLMES: No.

SWB: Had you been told what to expect.

JOHN HOLMES: No.

SWB: But you had been told not to feed...

JOHN HOLMES: Aft- only after we had secured the camp.

SWB: And who told, tell me more about that, how did you get

the word.

JOHN HOLMES: We got it from our battalion commander, or one

of our officers, cause I can't recall whether it was a major

or a captain that said, do not give them anything to e- the

word was passed all the way down the line, do not feed these

prisoners, under any circumstances. Because, they wanted as

many of them alive as possible. Cause see they all had a

story to tell, also. Where they were captured, how long,

what concentration camp they came from, because a lot of the

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 9

instances, see, like Bergen Belsen all of those places like

that, when they, if, they needed workers, and didn't have

enough in one sector, they would send them from, on a train,

boxcars full of them, all the way down to another sector to

fill out as a work force. Those that they could trust.

SWB: What did the people when you went in the barracks with

these tall benches, what did the people do...

JOHN HOLMES: The-th-th-they-they couldn't, those that were

living, all they could, they-they looked death eating a soda

cracker. That's what we used to call it. They-they-it-they

were like s- they were skinny, skin and bones. You-you can

you imagine a skeleton trying to talk to you? And holding

out his hand? Can you imagine that? Can you get any kind

of inkling what it's like. And this is all you saw. These

people could not get up. These people were literally

abandoned. And I imagine that um, when the Germans took

off, running, I imagine that those that were capable of

going, they herded them in front of them, because see,

ah-uh-uh-uh-uh-upon our approach, the Germans were not gonna

stick around. They were not gonna stick around to, for us

to see them nor how many prisoners they took with them. And

whether they killed them or not, I do not know, but you know

the orders were from Adolf Hitler, was to, that any

prisoners that, when the Americans approach, kill all the

prisoners. That was...

SWB: What about any revenge against the Germans because of

this. Do you think any of that, did it instill anger...

JOHN HOLMES: No. It didn't distill, it didn't in instill

anger, because you know s- number one, I think the shock of

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 10

something like that, could I explain something? If you're

fighting a German soldier and you kill him, that happens.

You look down at him, and that's and you keep right on

moving. That's an individual that's trying to kill you and

it doesn't make any- But when you see something where here

is a, s- here are individuals by the dozens that have done

nothing to no one. Bu- fu- their-their-their-their captors

said do this or do that, and you did it. This is, you were

so shocked by this, looking at it, that I don't, I think,

the-the-the-the shock of something like that does not wear

off right away. So therefore, you can't uh, you can't, y

you just can't, I just don't know how to p-, I wished I

could phrase it. Cause I can still see it. I-I'm, as I'm

talking to you now, I can see the whole horrible picture,

and it's not nice.

SWB: So, do you know if there was any message to bring help

to those people?

JOHN HOLMES: Oh yes. Our commanding officer, see we had

radios, in the tanks, and um, we had our hat tracks that had

communication to divisions. And the divisions in turn would

get the medics up there. And they, the medics would come in

and they would load these prisoners onto, two and a half ton

trucks, by the dozens. And they'd, they would take them

back to the rear hospitals, and they work with them until,

oh, three or four months, six months, they would get their

strength back to where they could walk around, but when you

could just look at them, some of them had sores the size of

your hands on them. Where they had been laying there for

weeks. In their own excretement. Stench.

SWB: We need to get room tone...

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 11

[ROOM TONE]

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: I want you to tell me what kind of impact this had on

you.

JOHN HOLMES: The impact that it had on me was the fact that

uh, I-I, I-I never quite understood it. It is hard to, w

war is uh, I-I think one of the, one of the worst things

that has ever happened to this country is that it never got

a chance to fight on its own soil against a formidable

enemy. It's always gone out, done the fighting on that

enemy's soil. If the people in this country could actually

see what total war is all about in reality, they would have

a different perspective on everything that's around them. I

think they would have a little more compassion toward one

another, because when you have a race of people who think

that they are superior to everybody else, and everybody else

is dirt underneath their feet, um, you're gonna have, same

thing, cause one of the things that history says it's

always, if you don't remember the mistakes in the past

you're going to repeat it all over again. Um. This is

something, this episode over in Germany and France and

Belgium and Holland and Luxembourg, where I fought in, I

just couldn't believe that the enemy could be as cruel and

brutal as he was. And the thing about it, the Germans, many

of the Germans right today, don't, do not believe that this

actually happened, that these, they don't believe that the

Holocaust, and the young, I-I spoke at the University of

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 12

Portland and the University of Seattle and they, so many of

the childr- the students out there did not believe that the

Holocaust really happened. They thought it was just a

figment of imag- of their, you know, my imagination when I-,

and I said look, I said, this is a black man talking to you,

I said, this, y-y-you're not talking to a white man, I said,

I'm telling what I fought in and what I saw. I said, I'm

not, you, I don't have to ask nobody. What I went through

and what I saw.

SWB: Tell me more about the condition of those people that

you saw. Were they still people? I mean, what was it that

brings you, what is it that is so devastating about that

scene other than seeing the enemy who was trying to kill you

who you had killed.

JOHN HOLMES: What about it? Those people, that like I said

before, those people could not help themselves. They had no

help from no one. Th-th-they were between a rock and a hard

place. You got to do what you're told. The best thing that

ever happened t-, what some of them did for us, uh, which I

thought was th-, was amazing, is that they sabotaged a lot

of the German shells and what have you. Cause one of the,

one of the, on our way through the Hartz mountain, I can

remember that when the Germans dropped uh some mortars in on

us, not a single one explode. They didn- they didn't

explode at all. Only did we find out later only that there

was no fuse to set them off. They just left the fuses out

of them, the shells.

SWB: And you make a connection between those people that

you found in that...

JOHN HOLMES: Yes. They say-, in other words, they actually

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 13

saved a lot of American lives absolutely, by defusing a lot

of the German artillery shells and mortar shells. Because,

at the darndest thing that this, when we crossed the, is it

the Rhine, I think it's the Rhine or the Danube, I'm not

which one that it was in the south down there, we crossed

this big river on the pontoons, and that was, was a horrible

thing. I think I would have died a deat- a thousand deaths,

you're going to cross this river, and it's like this, and

you've got about three or four hundred feet going across the

river, and the thing is like this, and you've got a 36 ton

tank that bobbing up and down, it's kind of worse, but when

you got to the other side, and we're in the middle of this

town, and we had just got out of that, I had just got out of

the turret of my tank, and we were kind of, the guys, y-y

you need to stretch your legs a little bit and as, there's

no artillery fire around you, the Germans are way up in the

high ground away from you, now what the, so they decide, the

Germans decide to drop a few mortars in on us. And the, and

the darndest thing I ever saw in my life, three of them fell

right in the midst of us. Not a single one exploded.

SWB: Go back and tell me again about the people that you

found there.

JOHN HOLMES: Just death, really. They were walking dead,

as far as I could see. Living dead. I don not know how

many of those people in those barracks were dead, but I do

know this. That there were many of them. Because you could

see them. When you see, wh-when you don't see any ribs

going up and down as you're breathing, and you look down and

you, and-and you can smell that too, you know they're dead.

And those that-that are laying there and they're trying to

stretch their hand out to you and they can't talk, because

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 14

they don't have the strength, and now, I-I don't, I do not

remember anyone but that American colonel, being helped up.

And he had to be helped up and helped to move one leg in

front of the other. This is how, this is how bad it was.

In other words, he was, they-they had to, two-two soldiers,

one with his arm around holding him up, and the other one on

the other side holding him up. And-and-and his feet were

actually dragging basically. All the, other than that all

the rest of them were still back in those, in-in those

bunks. This was. This is a site I'd I-I'd never forgotten

that. And what had bothered, w-w-w-w-w-w-one of the amazing

things to me was Mrs. Schimmel, Mrs. Schimmel did not know

all of this was going on, cause this was just about, I'd say

three quarters of a mile back of her. But I imagine though

by her being Jewish, she was actually hidden. She assumed

the identity of the people that protected her. There's a

lot of good German people now. I think some of the German

people knew what was happening. But she didn't see it.

Cause she didn't know what that, that all of this death and

destruction was going on back of her. She could smell it

but she didn't know what it was. Far as she was concerned,

it was some of the bloated animals out there, and not being

a-acclimated to the smell of humans and animals too, I

imagine she just assumed that it was all just one thing. So

this, th-that's all I can attribute it to with her. She was

just an innocent bystander, and I was often, I was, I kept

thinking, I said now, how, first of all she said to me, I

ask her, I said Mrs. Schimmel, I said how is it that you

survived this. And she explained to me, she said well they

protected me. And she, I think she had assumed their name,

and that's probably what saved her. I don't know whether

she blended in with the family or, or what. But this house

was slightly isolated from the rest of the town, so that

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 15

perhaps is what saved her.

SWB: Does that experience of opening that camp have more of

an impact on you than just the whole general combat

experience?

JOHN HOLMES: Oh yes, it, see because number one, when

you're fighting and you're killing, you can do that with

impunity. You don't forget this thing. Number one, you

have an enemy to kill. Or else, you're gonna die. You have

one or two choices. But when you see this, and you, and

they can't do nothing about what's happening to them, sure

you're not going to forget it. You never will. It's

impossible to forget something like that. Um, I forget the

name of the camp down around Munch... Ah-ah- is that, no,

it's not Auschwitz.

?: Dachau

JOHN HOLMES: Dachau, that's the one. Um, we had a

lieutenant, uh, in the outfit, that was at that camp, but he

just happened, him, he was a, a, his tanks, his column of

tanks were, were moving through and he asked um, the

soldiers what was going on inside of there, and that was f-

, that was the only time I ever heard of a concentration

camp was when he said th-that that was at Dachau. But like

I said I never knew what a concentration camp was. I didn't

even know what a labor camp was. Cause what I was, the only

thing that we didn't, see we'd never had, we'd never had the

opportunity, because see we were constantly on the move and,

you, and-and-and-and you're shooting and fighting at the

same time and it's constant- we had 183 days of combat. And

it was just constantly go-go-go, and to-to run into a

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/9/95 Int. JOHN HOLMES Page 16

situation like this was just, it was ph-ph-phenomenal to me,

I just didn't have, believe anything like that existed.

SWB: Thank you very much....

END

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